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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: IRANIAN REFUGEES IN IRAQ

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SUMMARY  
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1. An estimated 7,000 Iranian refugees live in Iraq, mostly in settlements from Al Amarah to Al Kut. Life for them has become more precarious with the defeat of the former regime. When most arrived in Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war 23 years ago, the regime rewarded refugees with parcels of land. However, in the last month, some refugees complain they have been forcibly evicted from their homes in the south, with their houses burned, crops destroyed and land seized by local Iraqis. Other Iranian refugees have left their homes to travel back to Iran, only to find the border posts closed, and little or no water or food available. UNHCR is aware of the situation and has met with Iranian refugee representatives to try to resolve the problems and to restart the repatriation of the Iranian refugees. End Summary.

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BACKGROUND  
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2. The largest number of Iranian refugees in Iraq reside in the town of Dujaila, south of Al Kut. Of a population of 12,000 in Dujaila, 5,000 are Iranian refugees. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) met recently with refugee representatives in the town. One UNHCR official described the situation as "explosive" and said it could lead to armed conflict between groups of local Iraqis and Iranian refugees, both of which have weapons. Some refugees complain they have been ordered out of their homes by Iraqis, with their homes and crops destroyed and land taken. UNHCR said even the four Iraqi tribal leaders with whom they met in Dujaila stated that it was "time for the Iranians to leave behind their lands and to return to Iran." Some refugees complained that local Iraqis told them they were living on the Iraqis' land and to return to Iran. Others said they heard an Iranian radio broadcast, telling them to go to the border because they would be allowed to cross into Iran. Some refugee families refuse to leave because they do not want to abandon or be forced to sell off their livestock.

3. Responding to these push factors, an estimated 500 refugees left their homes in Al Kumayt and the River Sa'ad areas. The refugees traveled to the Makhfar Sharhani border crossing between Iraq and Iran, and this group is camped at the Iraqi border post in the middle of a desert, about 100 kilometers northeast of Al Amarah.

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DART ASSESSMENT OF REFUGEE CAMP  
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4. The DART and the International Medical Corps, escorted by two Coalition vehicles, traveled to the refugee encampment on 10 May for a rapid assessment of the water and food needs of those living at the border crossing point.

5. The road to the border narrows from a two-lane, blacktopped road to a one-lane, partially paved road, scarred by the 1980 Iraq-Iran war, explosions of landmines, and years of neglect. At the approach to the border post, signs posted along both sides of the road read in Arabic: "Ihzar: Haql Algham," or "Watch out: Minefield." Burned Iraqi tanks and trucks dot the barren landscape that parallels the highway northeast to the border.

6. The Iraqi border post consists of a few buildings, including one that resembles a miniature castle with four

towers, long ago abandoned for use by immigration and customs officials. The tribal leader of the refugees, or sheikh, says life at the border post is "harder than the life of an animal. At least, animals are provided with shelter." Temperatures already reach into the upper 90s (Fahrenheit) during the day, and will get hotter as summer begins.

17. The refugees are camped out mostly in the open, a few of them using large tents for housing, including the sheikh and his extended family, but most have erecting shacks of corrugated metal sheets, supported by wooden slats and covered with blankets or strips of fabric.

18. Although the sheikh says 104 families or about 750 Iranian refugees have been living at the border for a month, the DART estimated the refugee population at about half that number. The sheikh said he expects more families to follow them to the border post once it is confirmed they can cross into Iran.

19. There is no running water or electricity at the settlement. Refugee women fill a 20-liter jerrycan or bucket with drinking water from a tanker provided by the Iranian Red Crescent Society, one kilometer east of the settlement at the border and walk back to the camp, carrying the containers on their heads. The sheikh told the DART the group receives daily visits by the water tanker. Refugees International personnel, in a later visit to the refugee encampment, were told the tanker visits are infrequent. The refugees told the DART the water is clear and clean, although it has not been tested for impurities or bacteria. Many parents complained that their children suffer from diarrhea. According to the refugee leader, one baby died of pneumonia. Another child died after being bitten by a poisonous snake. Several refugee families had limited amounts of antibiotics including amoxicillin.

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IRANIAN RED CRESCENT SOCIETY ASSISTANCE  
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10. The Iranian Red Crescent Society (IRCS) sends a doctor to the camp every four to five days. An estimated 15 women are pregnant. One pregnant woman, due to give birth in a few days, according to her medical paperwork, said she has yet to see a doctor at the camp because all the visiting doctors have been men.

11. IRCS also provides a small amount of food to the refugees. The amount and variety of food varies but may include bread, canned meat or fish, peas, tea, biscuits, and occasionally, dates. The refugees say British troops who visited the camp a few weeks ago brought with them nine bags of rice, some tea and tins of pork for the refugees (but quickly withdrew the pork when they realized their mistake of offering it to Muslims). Some refugee families have livestock including chickens, sheep, and cows.

12. There are no latrines at the camp, and the refugees relieve themselves anywhere in the settlement, which is surrounded by unexploded ordnance and mines. According to the sheikh, one child threw a rock into the dirt recently, and it hit a landmine, causing it to explode. A shepherd also passed through the camp with his herd, triggering another landmine explosion, which killed four sheep. Fortunately, no one has been hurt in the camp from UXO or landmine explosions.

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UNHCR ASSISTANCE  
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13. UNHCR representatives in Basrah said they plan to travel to the border encampment by the end of the week to assess how to help the refugees. One UNHCR official said his approach would be two-fold: 1) for UNHCR to pressure Iran to restart the refugee repatriation program and 2) to persuade the refugees to leave the border regions for safer encampments until UNHCR can help them return to Iran in a safe and orderly manner.

14. UNHCR plans to send additional humanitarian assistance to Dujaila this week to help defuse tensions between Iranian refugees and Iraqi residents. UNHCR, in conjunction with the World Health Organization (WHO), plans to send a WHO health kit to provide medications to the 5,000 Iranian refugees as well as the Iraqi residents in town. A second WHO health kit has been requested and UNHCR will determine later where to send it. UNHCR has also hired an Iraqi contractor to provide eight 15,000-liter water tankers to Dujaila; four of them to supply the refugees with drinking water and the other four for the Iraqis. UNHCR has also contacted the World Food Program about providing additional food stocks to benefit all 12,000 residents of Dujaila.

15. A smaller group of 60 Iranian refugees left their homes around Al Kut and traveled to a UNHCR transit center, 20 kilometers east of Basrah. The center was badly looted during the war and has no amenities. UNHCR officials have visited the refugees there, and strongly urged them to return to their homes or to go to safer areas away from the border. It is not known how many may have left the border transit center.

16. UNHCR says it successfully assisted in the repatriation of 1,050 Iranian refugees from Iraq until the Iraqi government suspended the program shortly before the war began March 20. Since then, Iran has been reluctant to restart the program because of apparent fears that Iraqis may 'infiltrate' the refugees.

17. UNHCR says it is hesitant to provide assistance to the refugees camped at the border because the border post north of Al Amarah and the transit center east of Basrah do not have any facilities, and are in heavily-mined areas. UNHCR fears additional assistance might attract other Iranian refugee families to move to the border encampments.

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RECOMMENDATION  
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18. The situation of the Iranian refugees in Iraq, in the long-term, is more a problem requiring a political than a humanitarian solution. It is suggested that UNHCR-Geneva should continue negotiations with Iran to restart the repatriation of Iranian refugees from Iraq. In the short term, if UNHCR is unable to persuade the Iranian refugees to leave their temporary encampments for safer areas away from the border, UNHCR will need to develop a plan to provide assistance to the refugee groups without prompting more refugees to migrate to the encampments.

JONES